

PROFILE

- 28
- Male
- Korean
- Buddhist
- Studied: electronics, BA in English literature
- Practice of meditation: 4 years

Why did I start meditating?

When I was in my teens I had difficulties with my family and myself. My parents lived separately and both my brother and I had to live without our mother for many years. I missed her terribly. Some fundamental questions arose in my mind: “Who am I” and “Why do I suffer?”

I decided to try some traditional Korean Buddhist practices, and for many years I practised chanting and bowing every day. I had been led to believe that this was the only way to grow and develop spiritually. But then I found out that the Buddha had actually neither taught chanting nor bowing but that he had taught many different methods of meditation. So I took up the practice of mindfulness meditation and also began to study the canonical scriptures.

How has meditation changed my life?

The most important thing I learned from doing mindfulness meditation was that nothing can give me permanent satisfaction. Once I understood this point, it became much easier for me to let go of things. This understanding gave me more freedom. Now, whenever I have problems, I can see that I want satisfaction from things which are impermanent. When I clearly understand this, I can let go of the problems. So meditation has changed my views and the way I cope with my life.

Mindfulness meditation specifically helped me to find solutions to problems and to deal with them with the right attitude. Actually, most problems arise because people have wrong ideas or wrong expectations. I, too, used to think that I could become happy if only I had certain things. Most people seem to think that happiness can be gained by acquiring all those things that everyone else values – things like money, cell phones, cars, houses, friends and partners. Meditation made me realize that fulfilling such desires will never make us truly happy, that chasing after those things will never give us permanent satisfaction or contentment.

Practising mindfulness meditation made me realize that real happiness, as well as the solution to problems, can only be found 'inside'. The mind makes us happy or unhappy; the mind creates most of our problems. This awareness has helped me to be more content with what I have and to more calmly accept whatever happens to me. It also serves me as a tool to examine and solve problems.

So whenever I have difficulties I try to examine them closely during formal sitting meditation. The causes of a problem as

well as possible solutions will usually become clear in the mind by just being with that particular problem, by just calmly looking at it. For example, I recently had an argument with my brother. I felt very upset and hurt when he walked away without a word and when he later avoided looking at me. I very strongly felt that I was right and could not understand why he was doing this to me. I became more and more angry and at the same time I also started feeling depressed about the whole thing.

However, I then realized that I was identifying with all these emotions and that I needed to take a calm look at them. I remembered that the problem was not my brother but what was going on in my own mind. So I sat down to meditate. There was a big debate going on in the mind: "I am right. What I said was right. He is wrong." "No, your response was inappropriate, you are to blame, and you should feel guilty." It went on like this for quite a while but then the mind became calmer and quieter. As I continued observing without getting involved, the aversion and frustration gradually dissolved and then – I don't understand quite how – suddenly all anger was completely gone.

Immediately I was very happy and felt a lot of love and compassion towards my brother. I clearly understood his point of view and saw my own selfishness. I went up to him, told him what had happened (he is a meditator too), and apologized for my behaviour. This is just one example to explain how I found the solution 'within' to restore harmony with the world 'out there'.

The practice of mindfulness meditation has given me inner strength and wisdom. It has changed the way I lead my life and the way I communicate with other people. I am convinced that I will continue to change and grow for the rest of my life.

PROFILE

- 30
- Female
- American (of Burmese origin)
- Buddhist
- Religion by birth: Buddhist
- Formerly in investment banking, currently administering a community adult career development program at a college
- Practice of meditation: 7 years

What started me meditating?

I was working as an analyst for a Wall Street company when my mother urged me to try out a ten-day Vipassanā meditation course. Although I was raised as a Buddhist, this was the first time I had ever heard the word Vipassanā. Not knowing what I was getting into, but more out of desperation to relieve stress, I signed up for a course.

My project manager, however, balked at my request: “You want to take off twelve days with so many transactions going on right now? And no contact – can’t you at least check your voice-mail? Not even the Managing Director would take this much time off!” I ditched the idea. Plans would be made and shelved a couple more times over the next year before I decided in angst that I would attend a course or leave the job. I went, and kept the job.

The ten-day course was nothing like I had expected, but eye opening in many ways. I discovered a world of sensations. However, coming back from the course, the elation lasted only so long; one week back at work and I had forgotten all about the practice.

Two months later I moved overseas to work at a branch of the same company. There the workload even intensified. As a stress relief and because I did not have many friends in the new country, I decided to pick up the practice again. I sat for about 30-45 minutes after work every night, often around 1 to 2 a.m. Because these sits made my mind calm and peaceful, I also started experimenting during the day. Whenever I remembered, I would do some mindfulness of breathing – eyes open – and then get back to my work. When things got crazy I went to the ladies' room and watched the breath until the mind had calmed down.

During that period abroad I also started changing my reading selection – from corporate finance tomes to Dhamma books. I read books by Ledi Sayadaw, Sayadaw U Pandita, Ayya Khema, and Mahasi Sayadaw among others. I often contemplated on death and I realized I had to do something worthwhile in this lifetime.

Has meditation changed my life?

I became completely disillusioned with the money-making machinery of Wall Street, and started thinking about a complete change in lifestyle. Much to the dismay of many colleagues and relatives, I quit my job and left for Myanmar to learn more about Vipassanā.

Even as a child, I had always had an independent streak, had always wanted to go places. I had also continuously been

seeking new mental challenges, and I had this desire to discover an answer to fundamental questions by myself. Yet, at the same time, I had always been very much at the mercy of emotional roller coasters and self-inflicted suffering.

My stay at the Burmese meditation center was very fruitful both in terms of finding new challenges and answers as well as in getting to understand and learn about the constant emotional ups and downs. The emphasis on observation of the mind has helped me to accept and understand myself better and better, and I have become 'more comfortable in my own skin' – as the expression goes. The many months of intensive practice and the continued practice in daily life have also helped me to live more in harmony with the mind beyond the retreat center walls.

As I continue to practice, I have found a new kind of independence. It is a freedom from comparing myself with others, from anxiety about the future, and from intense wanting or craving. I have also become able to let go and accept whatever there is. If something is not there, it is not there – so simple!

I have also been experiencing more and more gratitude. Gratitude comes from an understanding of the interrelatedness of all beings. I feel gratitude to my family, my friends - particularly to my spiritual friends. Without the kind encouragement and support of teachers and fellow practitioners I would not have been able to make much progress towards freeing the mind.

On some level, walking on the path has been instantly gratifying. To the extent that I can see and understand the workings of the mind I am at peace right here and now.

PROFILE

- 29
- Male
- Czech
- Family background:
father no religion, mother Christian
- University education
- Teacher
- Practice of meditation: 7 years

Why did I start meditating?

I came across meditation by accident. When I was at university I had to sit for an exam in philosophy. It was a subject I did not really like but which was part of my degree and so I had to study it. The theme we were given happened to be Eastern Religions and so I also came to learn about Buddhism.

I was very impressed by the teachings of the Buddha and became very interested in learning about Buddhist meditation. A friend of mine told me about a meditation centre where he had regularly been going to practise. I took the opportunity to attend a three day retreat during which I immediately saw the benefits of meditation. I became even more interested in meditation and began to practise at home.

How has meditation changed my life?

Vipassanā meditation has given meaning and direction to my life. It has helped me to understand my own character, to recognize the positive parts and accept the negative parts. I learned how to deal with emotions such as anger, remorse, anxiety and worry. I became skilled at observing my thinking and at distinguishing between harmful and useful thoughts. This has made my mind more calm, clear, and content. As a result, I no longer feel so dependent on external things like TV, music, parties, or money.

The practice of mindfulness is about exploring the mind. I am very interested in watching the mind, so I never feel bored. To get to know how the mind works and to see what is hidden inside is a kind of entertainment for me. I really love to meditate.

I have been doing many retreats both in Europe and Asia and I have been spending months at a time concentrating on my meditation practice. This has given me the opportunity to really deepen my practice and also to get to know many interesting people of different nationalities.

PROFILE

- 32
- Female
- Chinese-Canadian
- Brought up as atheist
- Buddhist
- College education
- Clerk
- Got introduced to meditation in 2001, regular practice for past 4 years

Why did I start meditating?

In a way it all started when I was still living in Canada. I was at a party where most everybody was taking drugs in order to really enjoy themselves. I had taken some myself for the same reason, only this time they did not have the desired effect. Instead of feeling high, I had what you call a 'bad trip'. I went into a kind of coma and suffered through agonizing hours of total loneliness. I was aware of being with a group of friends, but I could not move or communicate, and experienced this deep feeling of being completely on my own and completely separate. To me it felt like an abyss I was totally lost in without any hope of ever getting out again. This experience was so very traumatic that it somehow has continued having an effect on me to this day.

The positive upshot of this 'bad trip' was that it really made me think about life. Why was there so much confusion, so much

suffering? I felt I needed a change of environment and some time for myself. I quit my job and went traveling in Central America. On a sightseeing trip in Guatemala I happened to stumble across a meditation center. It was run by a very friendly bunch of people who were into all sorts of new age stuff. I was very curious to experiment with meditation and I liked the people there, so I decided to do a one-month retreat. Among other things, we did yoga and between four to six hours of meditation every day. It was an eye-opener since this was the first time I really consciously worked with my body and my mind. On top of that it was also a sort of healing experience since I felt very secure in that environment. We were such a positive group of people, very accepting of each other, and at times I felt there was a strong atmosphere of unconditional love – something I had never experienced before.

After my return to Canada I went back to my ‘old’ life, i.e. I hung out with my ‘old’ friends again. However, I no longer felt at ease among them and so I did not stay long. I felt I needed a more permanent change of lifestyle and decided to move to London, where I lived and worked for the next one-and-a-half years.

It was during that time that I started meditating regularly. I attended weekend courses at a center run by a Hindu organization. They also gave talks on their particular understanding of spirituality and God. I had become interested in the concept or idea of God in Guatemala, where somebody had given me a book titled *Conversations with God*. I was increasingly drawn to this very positive crowd of people, and for the last six months of my stay in England I attended their daily ceremonies and medita-

tion sessions. What I found particularly appealing was that they had a very practical approach to meditation: they emphasized awareness in daily life.

How has meditation changed my life?

The next step was going to Thailand. I went there with my boyfriend but very soon became tired of traveling. I felt I really needed to spend time on my own and go deeper in meditation. I wanted to retreat from the busy world and explore my 'inner world'. Surfing the net I discovered a meditation center in the north of Thailand that offered an intensive 26-day meditation course in the Theravada Satipatthāna tradition. I was already familiar with the Theravada school of Buddhism through reading books by Ayya Khema and therefore decided to give it a try.

The practice was really tough, really intensive. We meditated from early morning until late at night, alternately doing sitting and walking meditation. We had regular meditation interviews that helped us to clarify and understand our experiences. The teacher was a kind and compassionate monk who guided us skillfully and who inspired us to keep going when things got tough. At the end of the course I asked for permission to stay at the monastery in order to deepen my practice. I stayed for a whole year, during which I developed a very good, trusting relationship with the teacher.

What is even more important is that I learned a few fundamental lessons. I realized and accepted that suffering was normal; it had become clear through my own experience that life is inherently unsatisfactory. I also learned to become aware of anger, to simply observe it, which enabled me to respond to situ-

ations creatively rather than to react in habitual ways and get carried away. Most importantly, I learned to observe the mind itself, i.e. to watch the activities of the mind in a detached way – a skill that is indispensable for spiritual growth.

For the last five months at the Thai monastery I ordained. Becoming a nun seemed to me at the time a natural and very meaningful step to further deepen my practice, to wholeheartedly commit myself to a path of spiritual growth. However, even though I had found that lifestyle very appealing, I still had worldly inclinations. So when my ex-boyfriend came to visit me I decided to go traveling with him and to once again experience and explore the world ‘out there’. Interesting as it was, I soon realized that my heart was not into it, that I needed to further develop my meditation practice. I said goodbye to my boyfriend and went my own way again.

Since I was curious to explore a different meditation method, I decided to stay at a monastery in Myanmar that had been recommended to me by a friend. The emphasis there was on Samatha (tranquility) meditation, i.e. the ability to control the mind and the attainment of higher meditative states. After three months, however, I decided to leave the center since I did not find the practice interesting. I was and am much more interested in getting to know and understand the mind, and so I decided to find a meditation center where I could practice mindfulness meditation (Vipassanā).

I found a very quiet monastery in the country, in northern Myanmar. It was quite new and there were only a few yogis. I became a nun again since I felt it was appropriate under the circumstances. It was the ideal place for me to practice since I felt a

great need to be silent and to learn to be on my own. I occasionally had meditation interviews with the abbot but I basically just continued doing the method I had learned in Thailand. I stayed there for over two years and practiced very intensively. However, for reasons I do not quite understand, I then started experiencing fear and physical tension. Since the teacher could not help, I decided to once again change meditation centers, this time moving to Yangon to learn from a very well known teacher.

The method taught there was mainly about focussing on bodily movements and sensations. We were told to move as slowly as possible and label all of our movements. Unfortunately, this was not at all helpful for me, in fact my fear and physical tension kept increasing. However, I tried to be a good yogi and kept at it, hoping things would eventually work out somehow. They did not. I felt misunderstood by the teacher and decided to move to a meditation center where the emphasis was on observing the mind.

That proved to be the right decision in many respects. After I learned to shift the main observation away from feelings and body to the mind, I was quite soon able to relax and to handle my fear. After only a few weeks the fear and the physical tension were completely gone. This new approach to meditation has radically changed my understanding of the practice. I have opened up and now have a very different attitude to meditation and to life. There is no need to focus on a particular meditation object – everything is a meditation object. I realize that trying to control things is not conducive to development, and that new understandings can only arise when one observes what is happening in a relaxed and receptive frame of mind.

I have learned to trust my own intuition and understanding, and also to be more open in my communication with others. The teacher's guidance is certainly very important, but I have also found it very useful to discuss my practice and problems with fellow yogis. The last few months taught me that being silent has its limitations. I think that it is much healthier to open up and communicate with each other, to learn from each other. One can be mindful while talking, and practicing this improves one's abilities to communicate.

Recently, I disrobed. The main reason for this step was that I have been feeling much more secure in myself. I somehow felt that being a nun had – at least for the time being – served its purpose and that it was time to relate to others and myself in a different role. Now I simply try to be in the present moment and to continuously learn from my experiences. Life is one big learning experience and there is so much more to learn.

PROFILE

- 38
- Male
- Singaporean
- Buddhist
- Aviation Instructor,
- Currently: Software Engineer.
- Practice of meditation: 10 years

Why did I start meditating?

I began to be interested in meditation because people told me that it would be good for me and that it would make my mind more clever and intelligent. However, my meditation practice actually only started when my mother forced me to meditate because she did not like the friends I was hanging out with. They were working and I was studying. They were only free at night, but I had to wake up very early in the mornings. The late nights were affecting my grades, so she decided that since meditation had changed her life it should change mine as well. In fact, it only deepened my affection for my friends.

How has meditation changed my life?

I started meditating seriously in early 1996. I immediately saw the benefits of the practice, and later that year I left for Yangon

to meditate at a well-known centre. I was a lay yogi for 9 months and then became a monk. During the summer of 1998, I followed my teacher to the US as his interpreter, as I can speak both English and Myanmar. The journey to the West fundamentally changed my attitude to meditation and as a result I developed a real hunger for more knowledge and know-how of the practice.

After my return to Myanmar I remained at the monastery for more than a year, but then I left and travelled the country extensively for over 6 months. I really had lots of fun, but could not put into practice what I had learned about meditation.

On my sister's and my mother's recommendations I then went to practise at the centre where they had been staying for some time. The practice taught there is very different from what I had done before. The emphasis is on observation of the mind, working with the right attitude and learning how to deal with the defilements (kilesa). I learned many very beneficial lessons there and have been applying them to my life ever since.

In June 2000 I returned to live and work in Singapore. I have been going back to the meditation centre for retreats at irregular intervals. These retreats have helped me cope with the emotional wounds I tend to receive when living in the 'outside world'.

In 2004 – after splitting up with my girlfriend – I fell into a deep depression. With the kind encouragement and help from the teacher, I managed to overcome it within less than a fortnight. During this short but very intensive retreat I not only learned how to deal with a depression, but I also learned to see the mind more clearly.

A few months ago I got married to a woman I have known for over ten years. We had been good friends and always got

on harmoniously, but since getting married we have been going through some difficult times. We are both Dhamma practitioners and we therefore have been able to meet those challenges constructively. My marriage has helped me become more accepting of other peoples' shortcomings and weaknesses. My relationship with my mother has also improved. I have learned to live with others more harmoniously and I have developed greater equanimity of mind.

PROFILE

- 32
- Female
- American
- Brought up non-religious
- Buddhist
- Education: BAs in Visual Arts and Religious Studies
- Art teacher
- Avocation: painting and writing
- Meditation experience: 7 years

Why did I start to practice meditation?

By the time I got to university I was burned out from years of living in a driven, competitive way. I was also dealing with grief resulting from my father's death two years earlier. I had suppressed the grieving process because of my need to do well in school and to keep going with all of the activities I was busy with. My single-minded motivation was to avoid collapse and make sure to earn myself entrance into an excellent college. I felt that meeting this goal would guarantee my future happiness.

I had also suppressed a great deal of pain from living in a family where the relationships had been strained for many years. My wild and rebellious sister, three years older than I, had brought out the stark differences between my parents' personalities and parenting styles. Our home was in a near-constant state of tension and fighting for about four years, as she acted out her teen-

age crisis, during which time my parents became more and more distant from each other. When my father's illness developed, his need for care brought them back together into loving connection, so my mother was even more profoundly grief-stricken when he died in my junior year of high school. During the years of family conflict I had taken on the role of giving moral support to my mother. I had alternated between trying to bring everyone to mutual understanding and joining in the violent criticisms. I also repressed many of my own needs for being parented and retreated into excelling in school and staying away from home much of the time in order to do extracurricular activities, to try to secure a sense of goodness and well-being, and to not become yet another "problem child."

During college the sense of loss developed into a chronic depression as the longing for the happiness I thought I would experience there went almost entirely unmet. My studies in art, literature and religion met some of my deep need to find meaning and connection in life, though most of the university professorate was participating in a fad of "deconstructionism" in their approach to their subject matter, which often felt like it stripped my studies of heart and soul. It was in a religious studies course entitled "The Compassionate Self" that I was first exposed to Dharma teachings, and the professor led a weekly Zen sesshin. However, I found the Zen form and strict emphasis on posture too severe and I felt alienated by this practice.

I also attended Quaker (Society of Friends) meetings, where the weekly "unprogrammed" largely silent worship and the community spirit of fellowship met some of my fast-growing spiritual need. I continued to attend Quaker meetings after graduat-

ing college, and have continued to attend once or twice a month since then. However, I find that my experience of Quaker worship/meditation is somewhat unsatisfying because of the lack of clear instruction. Terms like “centering down” and “the light within” have been too vague to help me in the difficult work of spiritual development. I also cannot manage to connect strongly with “God” in a worshipful, devotional or prayerful way.

It wasn't until my boyfriend took me on my first Vipassanā retreat, when I was 25 years old, that I found a meditation and spiritual practice that felt like it could directly address all the components of my experience that needed addressing: the profound sense of personal suffering, the comprehensive instruction in how to work with my experience in silence, and the compassionate guidance and support of teachers. The teachers were like parent figures to me, mature individuals who had found access to the wisdom which was leading them toward the genuine peace and well-being so lacking in my mother's and father's lives.

How has meditation changed my life?

At first, the Vipassanā retreats were places in which I could connect deeply with a sense of acceptance of suffering and the peace resulting from that attitude. I began to understand that the experience of suffering was not mine alone. I became more interested in forgiving myself and others, and less and less interested in continuing with aggression in my thoughts, words or actions. Through the concentration and investigation modes of the Dharma practice I could also access again the experience of vividness, of “living in the moment”, and the resulting sense of wholeness and joie de vivre that had been dampened since I was 11 years

old. As my heart began to open and find some contentment in retreat experience I was no longer so bewildered by a sense of personal suffering. However, I found trouble integrating the formal “sitting” practice and these fledgling glimpses of peace and understanding into my busy daily life. Once I returned home, I would spend a lot of time planning my next retreat and devouring Dharma books.

As my enthusiasm for retreat practice and the Dharma teachings grew, I attended more and more retreats, but the old patterns of striving and grasping for excellence and achievement unconsciously took more and more hold, and I lost “beginner’s mind.” My yearning to practice seriously enough for “enlightenment” drove me to attend longer retreats, but also burdened my practice with expectations. Delusions of grandeur sometimes corrupted my ability to clearly understand the nature of meditative experience. I also failed to make it to the cushion regularly when I was not on retreat. This “everything or nothing” approach made it impossible for me to be content with a simple daily practice. I started to feel a deep sense of doubt about my practice. The practice had also heightened my sensitivity, so the experience of suffering itself was even more noticeable than it had already been, and I started to increasingly resist the ordinary stimuli of life outside the protected conditions of retreat. I interpreted this as “disenchantment,” and more insight into the truth of dukkha, but in reality I was just more lost in my experience of dukkha – of wanting things to be different than they were.

At first, my motivation for practicing meditation had been to try to find some relief from suffering, some basic sense of well-being and peace. Basically, I wanted to feel better. Now, I am no

longer convinced of this as motivation for practice, because it takes the result – or effect – of proper practice as its aim. Now, I am beginning to understand that I need to develop the contemplative process into a rich and all-inclusive way of life. As I begin to appreciate more and more that “the path is the goal”, I become more patient and interested in all of what occurs moment-by-moment. Often these moments are moments of ordinary, mundane struggle. But now I am beginning to understand that I am not practicing to suppress or alter those experiences of struggle, or create desired or exalted mind-states. I am practicing in order to understand more deeply the nature of struggle as well as the joyous and free nature of non-struggle. To make this contemplation and inquiry into every ordinary moment and all states of being, whether on retreat or not, the center of my life - this is how the practice is changing me.

I now have more faith that if I practice correctly my heart will naturally become more and more open and caring, and my mind will become clearer and wiser. I have this faith because I have seen that this is just nature at work – proper practice leads to wholesome results. This is cause and effect, the natural law and order of things. So now, my life is about learning how to practice correctly, everywhere, at all times, and in all activities. This might manifest in acts of renunciation such as not taking another bite once I am full, or taking off a mask I have been wearing in a conversation with someone, or deciding to drop an argument with my mother. This letting go of what becomes known to be harmful or unnecessary is an essential part of the practice. But I also strongly feel that certain things need to be experienced, taken up and consciously explored in order to understand their true

effect on the mind and heart. This might mean taking another bite after I am already full, just because it tastes good, or being aware of the pain of keeping on the mask I am wearing in my conversation with someone, or not standing in aversive silence listening to my mother's opinions. Maybe I need to fight with her again, to feel that pain again. I see that acts of renunciation can be done too soon, from a place of incomplete understanding. In the name of proper practice we can miss the valuable learning experiences into the nature of suffering that could be the very experiences which would free us.

Meditation practice is a profound invitation to allow our entire way of life and thinking to be changed. How could Dhamma practice be anything less than an ongoing process of many changes, until we are ready for realizing the deeply transformative Vipassanā insights?

PROFILE

- 25
- Female
- American
- Buddhist
- Religion by birth: Jewish
- BA in Cultural Interdisciplinary Studies
- Started meditating six years ago

What made me start meditating?

I was brought up in the country, around a lot of wildlife, and my father started taking me on backpacking trips when I was about eleven. Judaism was always part of our life, but my parents and their friends were very open-minded and I was exposed to many spiritual traditions during childhood. This contact with nature alongside open-mindedness about spirituality were perhaps the main influences directing me towards meditation.

When I was 13, I had a Bat Mitzvah, a traditional Jewish coming-of-age ceremony marked by a reading from the Old Testament, in Hebrew, in front of a congregation of friends and family. I remember having a strong feeling of looking for God at the time and of being disappointed for not finding him. Reading the words attributed to God but not understanding them confused me, since I could not understand how they could possibly relate to my life.

The following years were very difficult: I began to rebel against Judaism and quit taking music lessons. I became very depressed, stopped putting in an effort at school, and frequently argued with my parents. In this period I also began to explore spirituality by myself. I read books by Hermann Hesse, studied astrology, practiced ChiGong, and went for long walks in the forest on my own. I was very unhappy at high school where I had few close friends. Things became so turbulent at home that my parents agreed to let me move away and go to a boarding school. It was a small school founded by the philosopher and spiritual teacher Krishnamurti.

The school provided an environment that valued self-inquiry, self-exploration and dialogue as tools to nourish the mind. I made friends with other students who were interested in yoga, meditation, nature, and art. My relationship with my parents began to improve. I became politically aware and I started taking an interest in environmental issues.

At seventeen I went to Ecuador for the summer, where I worked as a volunteer in a small indigenous mountain village. The experience of poverty, humility and strength of spirit of the people there really blew my worldview wide open. I had never seen anything like it before. After my return to the US, I again changed schools, this time to a small international school with rigorous academic standards. It was during the two years I studied there, and during the following year when I traveled in Israel and Europe, that I really became more politically conscious. I also became more spiritually conscious but I could not see how these two parts of me could ever connect. It felt like having two different personalities.

I was very interested in spirituality, but I was too impatient to explore it in any depth, and I did not have any contact with a teacher. I could not see what meditation had to do with changing the world. However, at the same time, it did not feel right to always struggle against the way things were and to always want to change things.

In 2001 I started university. There was a small Dharma Center nearby and I started going there to meditate. I did not understand how to integrate meditation into my life, but it certainly helped me to calm my mind. One day, after the morning meditation session, I went for a bicycle ride. Going downhill in an unfamiliar part of town I lost control of the bicycle and crashed into a tree. I broke a collarbone and several ribs. I watched all of this happening as if in slow motion, and as I then lay there on the pavement I remembered to watch my breath. I felt a lot of pain but I did not panic. I realized that meditation had given me this ability to watch and accept what was happening.

There were also other reasons that made me take a deeper interest in meditation: I was surrounded by many politically active students who, like me, felt passionate about social and political change. However, I also saw how unhappy everyone actually was, and I realized that their actions were often motivated by anger and divisiveness.

After I had recovered from my accident, I traveled to Central America on a study program to learn about Base Christian Communities. These were rural communities organized in response to violence perpetuated against them by a corrupt military. The spirit of their organization was based on Christian Liberation Theology, which interprets the teachings of Jesus for the benefit

of the poor. It empowers people to see God in themselves and in each other, and to work towards their own liberation from social inequalities. This was the first time I had come across a spiritual tradition that informed and supported a social justice movement. I began to understand that peace in the world and peace within oneself cannot be separated – they must go together.

Back in the US, where I worked as an organizer for a farm worker union, I began to understand this point more deeply. I strongly believed in the work we were doing – helping migrant farm workers obtain labor rights – but I was disheartened by the sense of urgency and the feeling that we had to ‘fight an enemy’ and ‘win a battle’. It did not seem right to be acting out of strong feelings of self-righteousness, competitiveness, and anger. So, when I returned to university the following year, I moved into the Dharma Center, seeking a refuge from the politically charged climate of campus and the drugs and alcohol that were so frequently consumed there.

How has meditation changed my life?

As I began to meditate more, my academic interests started to shift from a more political focus to a more cultural and religious one. I was selected to go to Bodh Gaya, India, to do a program of Buddhist Studies. The program gave students the opportunity to learn about Theravada, Mahayana, and Tibetan Buddhism in both experiential and academic ways. Meditation felt so right, made so much sense to me. I really loved the Tibetan teachings and extended my stay in India for another four months so I could travel to Tibetan areas of India. I began to do Tibetan preliminary practices, which involve repetitive chanting of mantras, visualizations, and prostrations.

After returning to the US again, I began to seriously inquire into the juncture of working for social change and the Buddhist teachings. To complete my university degree, I wrote my thesis on socially engaged Buddhism. I looked at the lives of people involved with the Buddhist Peace Fellowship and how they applied the Buddhist teachings to their work for peace. Throughout these last months at university I continued doing the Tibetan practices, but I also became more interested in Vipassanā meditation. I felt that I did not understand the Tibetan practices deeply enough because I did not have the tools to observe my own mind.

I began to do some short Vipassanā retreats and felt encouraged by the practice, seeing that it helped me to become more grounded, less emotional, and a little more patient. I was also doing some part-time work as a caregiver for elderly people. Over time I saw that meditation helped me to become more present, caring, and mindful – not only with all the people I was caring for, but also with my friends and family, and even with myself.

After graduating, as a gift and a challenge to myself, I signed up for a three-month Vipassanā retreat. I was not sure what kind of work I wanted to do, and I just felt an overwhelming urge to do some intensive meditation. It seemed the best thing to do for my life – for myself and my relationships with others. Although I had done quite a bit of traveling, this felt like the most significant journey in my life so far, even though I was not even leaving my country.

When I finished the retreat, however, I felt like the journey had barely begun. There is so much more to learn. Every time I have a new insight or understanding, it seems I also expose

deeper layers of 'stuckness'. When I returned to California after the retreat, I realized that the most crucial part of the practice was learning how to apply it directly to my life in any situation. There is one instance that made this very clear to me: I was visiting my family and had a disagreement with my brother over something quite minor. I felt tremendous anger and hurt, but then I was able to see the nature of these feelings. I recognized the sensations in my body, the thoughts arising in my mind, and the reactivity to the thoughts and sensations. I saw that I believed the thoughts – that I identified with them – and that this kept me from seeing any other point of view. Very quickly the anger was completely gone and I was no longer attached to what I wanted. This experience stands out to me because there were such strong habits of judgment and blame embedded in my mind in relationship to my family. It was a major shift of perspective to see that I could relate with my family in a radically different way by just being aware of my mind.

Doing the three-month retreat not only gave me confidence and faith in the practice, but it also gave me a sense of resolution and the momentum to keep going. During that time, the idea was born to go to Asia to practice, but I felt that first I had to return to friends, family, and work. I wanted to settle down and try applying the practice to daily life.

I went back to working full time with elderly people and people with disabilities. I was living in a busy shared house with friends and dogs (the homeowner ran a dog-boarding business from the house). I was in a new relationship with someone who had also sat the three-month retreat. My life was very full and sometimes very stressful, but I kept practicing and slowly sav-

ing enough money to travel to Thailand and Burma. Living immersed in the world, I saw how distracted, tired, and emotional I could become. However, little by little, it was becoming clear that what I wanted more than anything else was to wake up, be present, and understand the nature of my mind under any circumstances, not just when I was on retreats. My community of friends and my boyfriend – who has become a close spiritual friend – also inspired and supported me to both explore the process of awakening in daily life and to deepen the practice through meditation retreats.

So when I had saved up enough money and felt ready, I left for Thailand with a one-way ticket, not knowing what the coming months would be like. Soon I arrived in Burma, where I have been staying at a meditation center for over three months. I intend to also explore several other monasteries and meditation centers over the next months in order to deepen my practice.

I have a strong sense that wherever I live, whatever I do, whoever I am with, I must go on, I must travel on this path. Mindfulness meditation has changed the way I see the world. It has helped me to become more human and awake because it has given me tools to understand my habit patterns. Even though I still sometimes get stuck in patterns of reactivity, I have faith in the practice. I have faith in the possibility of seeing things clearly and seeing things for what they are. Even though doubt and fear, likes and dislikes, judgments, despair, and greed continue to arise in my mind, I am willing to face them, willing to be patient, and willing to keep exploring.